
The Book as a Pedagogical Laboratory: Experimental Editorial Practices in a Studio-Based Design Course

Sofia Leal Rodrigues

Department of Communication Design, Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Lisbon, Portugal

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the pedagogical model of the project *The Book Beyond the Book*, developed within a studio-based master's course in editorial design. The project invites students to reconsider what a book can be in today's post-digital context, not through theoretical analysis but through practical, material, and conceptual experimentation. Each student defines a theme of personal relevance and develops an authorial editorial intention that guides the creation of an experimental book-object. The course is structured around a sequence of interconnected stages, including topic definition, formulation of an editorial concept, prototyping, and systematic experimentation with typographic, spatial, and structural strategies. Throughout the process, students refine their projects through guided studio critiques, progressively recognising how decisions concerning structure, sequence, rhythm, and material choices shape meaning and the reading experience. The pedagogical model draws on perspectives that understand the book as a visual and material system (Drucker) and on approaches to design education that frame design as a specific mode of knowledge mediated by material and visual processes (Cross). Over the duration of the course, the project has fostered conceptual clarity, material awareness, and authorial autonomy, enabling students to articulate coherent editorial intentions and translate them into consistent formal strategies. By framing book-making as an exploratory design practice, the project contributes to contemporary design education by promoting critical engagement, reflective skills, and an expanded understanding of the book as an active space for communication and authorship.

Keywords: Editorial design, Experimental book design, Design education, Authorial design

INTRODUCTION

In the context of contemporary editorial design, self-publishing can be understood as a practice that blurs the traditional boundaries between author, editor, and producer. By assuming control over different phases of the editorial process, the designer articulates content, form, structure, and production in an integrated manner, no longer acting exclusively as a service provider. This condition has been associated with self-initiated practices in which the designer takes an active role in the conception and materialisation of the publication (Lupton, 2008).

This situation poses specific challenges for editorial design education. If the designer operates simultaneously as author, editor, and producer, it becomes necessary to create pedagogical frameworks that enable students to work in an integrated manner across content, form, and structure, while assuming responsibility for the editorial decisions that inform the final object. In this sense, studio-based teaching and project-based learning prove particularly appropriate, as they favour iterative processes of research, experimentation, and reflection, rather than the application of predefined formal models.

This paper presents a pedagogical approach developed within a master's programme in editorial design, structured around the project *The Book Beyond the Book*. The project proposes the book as a pedagogical laboratory, challenging students to question what a book can be in contemporary contexts through the creation of authorial editorial projects. The paper describes the pedagogical context of the course, the framework and development of the project, and observations resulting from its application in a teaching environment.

PEDAGOGICAL CONTEXT

The project is developed within a second-semester project-based course (*Project II*), part of the Master's programme in Contemporary Typographic and Editorial Practices, offered by the Department of Communication Design at the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Lisbon. The course operates in a theoretical–practical format, with a strong emphasis on studio work, and is conceived as a space for experimentation, study, and exploration of contemporary editorial practices, with a particular focus on the printed object and, specifically, the book.

Throughout the semester, students develop individual projects supported by regular studio sessions, collective discussions, and intermediate critique moments. The pedagogical model prioritises project-based learning, articulating theoretical content (historical, cultural, and technical) with a tutorial component oriented toward experimentation, decision-making, and the critical grounding of editorial choices.

At the programme level, the course addresses the act of publishing, focusing on the book as a paradigmatic object of exploration within editorial design. Course content covers book conventions, its anatomy, the relationship between page and volume, and the coexistence of printed and digital publications. Within the contemporary post-digital context (Cramer, 2015), the course examines the conditions that sustain the continued relevance of the book, as well as processes of reconfiguration grounded in experimentation, the testing of publishing boundaries and dialogue with digital logics (Ludovico, 2012). It is within this framework that the authorial role of the designer in content creation, editing, and production of the editorial object is addressed. In practical terms, the course aims to provide knowledge and develop skills that enable students to creatively explore the book design process, both in terms of content and form.

PROJECT OVERVIEW: THE BOOK BEYOND THE BOOK

The Book Beyond the Book is the central project of the course and is grounded in a simple yet demanding question: what can a book be in contemporary contexts? Rather than seeking to establish a stable definition of the book, the project interrogates the limits, conventions, and expectations that continue to structure this notion, and explores how they can be critically tested through the design of printed editorial objects.

Instead of starting from a predefined text or content, the project asks each student to define and explore their own idea of a book, constructing an editorial position based on a set of possible axes. These include content-related issues (narrative, imagination, ideology), formal aspects (paratext, materiality, relations between material and immaterial), functional dimensions (the book as a vehicle for culture and knowledge), and relational aspects (interaction, exploration, modes of reading). These axes do not function as closed themes or fixed categories, but as fields of project-based exploration, mobilised differently by each student according to the editorial intention defined.

One of the project's central pedagogical objectives is to stimulate the role of the designer as author and/or editor, promoting responsibility for the creation, selection, interpretation, modification, and organisation of content for publication. What is at stake is not merely the graphic design of a book, but the formulation of an editorial intention – a guiding principle or logic capable of informing decisions regarding structure, sequence, rhythm, and materiality of the editorial object.

To prevent the project from remaining at a purely speculative level, the brief establishes a set of conditions that require concrete editorial decisions. The project develops around a clearly justified central theme and culminates in the production of one or more printed editorial objects that embody the developed idea of a book. The aim is not to produce a simple booklet, but a body of work whose scale and volume justify the research and editorial construction involved. Outcomes must present a title and a distinct graphic identity, as well as a relational organisation of content, articulated through a brief editorial text. Experimental approaches to formats, structures, materials, and production techniques are encouraged, provided they are coherent with the defined editorial position. When more than one object is produced, these should complement each other and may incorporate secondary elements such as inserts, posters, fold-outs, as well as digital extensions.

Within *The Book Beyond the Book*, the notion of the post-digital is associated with contemporary transformations in editorial practice and the conditions under which the book is conceived, produced, and read today. This framework informs the exploration of book structure, the problematisation of linearity and sequence, the relationship between materiality and reading experience, and the dialogue between printed and digital publication. The post-digital is not treated as an autonomous theme, but as a field of tension that enables the testing of conventions, the reconfiguration of formats, and the questioning of the place of the printed book in a context marked by

media coexistence, non-linear logics, and hybrid editorial practices across print and digital media.

From a process perspective, the project is structured as a shared pathway, while remaining open to diverse outcomes. This pathway comprises interconnected stages: research into the idea of the book and theme definition; formulation of an editorial intention; conception of project structure, understood as the transition from concept to book architecture; material and formal experimentation; and, finally, production and refinement of the editorial object(s), accompanied by the writing of a brief explanatory editorial text.

This process is distributed throughout the semester through moments of presentation and discussion of work in progress, including theme presentation, presentation of research and selected content, definition and structuring of the editorial proposal, and final project submission.

Within this framework, the book functions as a pedagogical device by enabling the articulation, within a single object, of decisions related to content, structure, sequence, and materiality. By working with these dimensions in an integrated manner, the project makes visible the relationship between conceptual choices and formal solutions, fostering critical reflection on book conventions and their role within contemporary editorial practice.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach presented in this paper is situated within studio-based design education and project-based learning, privileging processes of research, experimentation, and reflection developed through practice. The methodology does not rely on the systematic collection of empirical data, but on continuous observation of students' work, tutorial supervision of project processes, and critical analysis of outcomes produced across different editions of the course.

In this context, *The Book Beyond the Book* functions simultaneously as a pedagogical instrument and as a methodological framework. Through the design of authorial editorial objects, students are invited to develop design knowledge through the articulation of a personal conceptual intention and decision-making in concrete editorial solutions. This approach aligns with perspectives that understand design as a specific mode of knowledge, grounded in the manipulation of non-verbal and material codes capable of mediating between abstract requirements and concrete solutions (Cross, 2006, p. 10).

The work unfolds within a studio setting, with regular supervision, collective discussions, and moments of presentation and critical analysis of work in progress. This framework makes decision-making processes, encountered difficulties, and adopted strategies visible, promoting progressive learning based on iteration, reformulation, and justification of editorial choices.

This dynamic resonates with the notion of design as a reflective conversation, in which each project decision generates consequences that call for new interpretations and adjustments throughout the process (Schön, 1983, pp. 78–79). Within this context, the instructor assumes an orienting and

critical role, supporting the clarification of editorial intention and coherence between content, structure, and materiality of the produced object.

Studio work is articulated with theoretical classes dedicated to the analysis of books, publications, and contemporary editorial practices, which function as a space for critical contextualisation and the construction of operative references for project development. The examples presented do not serve as models to be replicated, but as starting points for reflection on different ways of editing content, structuring information, and configuring the reading experience. In this sense, the references introduced in class primarily contribute to the construction of an editorial imaginary capable of expanding the project's field of possibilities, without presupposing a direct correspondence between analysed examples and produced outcomes.

Classes focus on the analysis of editorial projects that make explicit the processes of editing commonly associated with the book, namely decisions related to content selection, organisation, structure, sequence, and modes of reading. This approach allows students to understand the book not as a neutral support, but as the result of a set of editorial decisions that inform the reading experience.

Examples analysed include design-authored books such as *A Die With Twenty-Six Faces* by Louis Lüthi, as well as self-reflexive publications such as *The Self-Reflexive Page* by the same author, or *Das Buchobjekt* by Robert Schäfer, in which the book itself exposes and interrogates its editorial operations. Approaches such as the book in *mise en abyme (Double-page)*, edited by Christoph Keller, Jérôme Saint-Loubert Bié, and Catherine de Smet) or the book-within-the-book (*Systematic Book Design?* by Jost Hochuli) similarly explore the book as a self-referential object, making its mechanisms of editing, structure, and organisation of reading explicit.

Within this framework, projects are also discussed in which editing asserts itself as a material and structural operation, such as the box-books by Gustavo Piqueira – *Lululux*, *Nine Months*, or *Era Preciso Estar em Sintonia com o seu Tempo* – in which the book functions as an editorial container that organises and articulates a set of complementary objects. Practices that incorporate processes of appropriation and transformation of digital content into printed objects are also addressed, such as *Phantoms (H_RT_F D_RKN_SS)* by Stephanie Syjuco, enabling discussion of editing not only as formal organisation, but as a critical stance toward the origin, circulation, and recontextualisation of content.

The choice of the book as the project's central object proves methodologically relevant by allowing the articulation, within a single support, of decisions related to content, sequence, structure, and materiality. By treating the book as a visual and material system in which form actively participates in the production of meaning, the adopted methodology makes explicit the relationship between conceptual intentions and formal solutions (Drucker, 2014, p. 9; p. 139). This approach fosters an integrated understanding of editorial design, recognising the book not merely as a content carrier, but as a medium that structures reading experience and meaning-making.

Accordingly, the methodology presented does not aim to evaluate outcomes in normative or comparative terms, but to understand how a pedagogical framework centred on experimentation, authorship, and critical reflection can contribute to the development of editorial, conceptual, and critical competencies in design education. Within this context, book-making is understood as an exploratory editorial practice that enables students to articulate content, structure, materiality, and authorship through design.

RESULTS

At an initial stage, students tend to respond to the open-ended theme with ambivalent feelings. On the one hand, they recognise the freedom and authorial potential of the project; on the other, they express a degree of anxiety in response to the absence of predefined content or formats. This initial reaction, often associated with the difficulty of “getting started,” proves productive by requiring each student to assume conceptual and editorial decisions from the outset.

Throughout the semester, a wide diversity of themes and approaches emerges. Some projects maintain a closer relationship with traditional book conventions, while others adopt more experimental perspectives on what a book can be in contemporary contexts. The analysis of editorial projects in class, combined with the requirement for autonomous reference gathering, plays a decisive role in the construction of an editorial, conceptual, and material imaginary that guides project development.

Regarding content definition and selection, two recurrent approaches can be identified. Some students adopt a clearly authorial stance, producing original content for their projects; others operate primarily as editors, selecting, filtering, and reorganising content by other authors and articulating it with original elements. In both cases, students develop an active awareness of the editorial process and of the responsibility inherent in decision-making within a self-initiated project, often associated with self-publishing practices.

From a formal and material perspective, projects demonstrate a growing understanding of the graphic and structural conventions of the book, as well as their potential reconfiguration in contemporary contexts. Solutions range from traditional binding methods, such as sewn signatures, to structures that require alternative modes of reading, including multiple orientations, varied page scales, fold-out elements, or extensions into digital media, such as QR codes. These outcomes indicate a consistent reflection on the codex form in relation to current editorial practices and post-digital reading modes.

CONCLUSION

The question “what can a book be in contemporary contexts?” is not treated in this paper as a theoretical problem to be resolved, but as a point of departure for editorial practice within a pedagogical framework. Throughout the project presented, this question functions as a working engine, encouraging students to adopt an active stance toward the book and to make decisions regarding content, structure, and materiality.

The observed results highlight the diversity of possible responses, shaped by each student's editorial intention and by the specific ways in which the project's different axes are mobilised. This diversity is understood as an integral part of the process, since the project does not aim at the standardisation of outcomes, but at making editorial and authorial processes explicit.

Without seeking to establish models or generalisations, the paper suggests that a pedagogical framework centred on experimentation, editing, and authorship contributes to a more integrated understanding of editorial design. Within this context, the book asserts itself not as a stable format, but as an active field of investigation and practical exploration within design education.

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